

From this week's *The Tablet*

A Pope of communion

The first pope from the United States has made it clear he will build on the 'precious legacy' he inherited from Francis – but it is clear too that his style of leadership will be very different / By **AUSTEN IVEREIGH**

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IN INTERVIEWS in the run-up to the conclave, I steered clear of making predictions in order to focus on the process: what the cardinals were drawing up by way of profile, and how they would go about finding whom it fitted. But one day, up on the terrace the US network CBS shared with the BBC, the former's Seth Doane asked me on air: "Do you think we're in for a surprise?" By then I had grown certain it would be Cardinal Robert Prevost and, unable at the moment to think of an answer that wasn't a lie, I blurted out: "I think you should get ready for an American pope." Seth nearly fell off the terrace. "An American?!" he spluttered. I said I was beginning to hear Prevost's name, and that of all the *papabili* being spoken of, his profile most neatly matched what the cardinals said they were looking for.

By then I had realised something else: the Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, was the reverse-gear in the conclave. His take-back-control supporters were organised and ready to roll: he could count on the Italian curial establishment – a network of Vatican interest groups expert in power plays – as well as European conservatives of various stripes, who spoke of the need now for "clarity,

order and authority". Parolin would land 30-40 of the 133 votes on the first ballot. But I could see him getting stuck there, as the Italian establishment candidate Cardinal Scola did in 2013. For in weight and numbers, the cardinal-electors were no longer mostly European but Asian, Latin-American and African. Francis had broken that mould, captivating the world with a new way – missionary, pastoral, humble, not stuck in the sacristy but out with the people, whose proclamation showed forth "God's style". For most of the cardinals this was the way indicated by the Second Vatican Council. They wanted more of that. You only had to hear Parolin give a homily – dour, formal, courtly – to see that this was what Francis, implementing Vatican II, had left behind.

MANY MEDIA narratives, focused on a supposed doctrinal divide between "liberals" and "conservatives", missed this deeper evangelising choice at stake. How the Pope related to the world was now key. A self-referential Italian Pope would spell ecclesial introversion, power games, and corruption and worldliness of various kinds. People I spoke to in the Vatican who had watched Parolin weave webs

Pope Leo with the College of Cardinals in the Sistine Chapel the day after his election

of patronage while standing for nothing in particular ("*é un nullo*") were dreading his victory. What they wanted was clear from the cardinals' communiqués: a teacher of humanity, a shepherd with the face of a Samaritan Church, a leader who was collegial and synodal. Clearly the search was on for another Francis, but not a photocopy. It needed to be someone with experience of the universal Church, preferably multilingual; an evangeliser-in-chief who could speak to hearts; a statesman who could build fraternity in a world at war; and a governor who could get to grips with the Vatican.

Yet many in the Franciscan majority wanted changes; among them were those closest to Francis and his vision. They noted that Francis had designed the reform of the Curia but lacked the muscle to drive it through; he could have achieved this with better use of the college, they said. They praised the Pope as a pioneer of synodality, yet in his own governance pointed out that he was personalistic, making decisions alone, distrusting the Curia. The post-Francis Pope, in other words, needed

to be in his mould, but giving his reform and teaching institutional expression, rooted in the Church through “synodality, lived in close connection with episcopal collegiality”, as the cardinals’ communiqué put it on 30 April.

When I heard that most Latin-American and some English-speaking cardinals were looking to Prevost, the penny dropped. “Who was it who was prepared for this, by experience and gifts?” asked Cardinal Nichols, talking of the conclave discernment in his homily last Sunday at the English College. “In whose heart was this vocation written?” The one who knew about that experience and those gifts was Francis, who – I now realised – had over the years quietly prepared Prevost to succeed him.

After serving two years as provincial back in Chicago, Prevost had taken over as prior general of the Order of St Augustine in 2001, serving two terms at the mother house in Rome, until 2013. His extraordinary gift for Latin languages – Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, French – served him well as he spent six months of each year criss-crossing the globe visiting his communities. If the choice at that time was between the Church as self-referential institution and the Church as missionary, battlefield hospital, Prevost’s period as prior general was clearly about encouraging the latter, Fr John Murray OSA, an Australian Augustinian in Thailand who knew “Bob” well, told me. “He was clear that, within the charism of our order, community life is not lived for itself, but for mission,” he says. “It’s about serving the education and pastoral needs of the Church, that’s what we’re here to respond to.”

It was when Prior Prevost regularly visited his friars in Argentina that he formed a bond with the Archbishop of Buenos Aires. Both were natural leaders of their respective religious orders who had from an early age been given responsibility, developing a spirituality that gave them calm in the midst of crises, as well as a resolve to carry out what they had discerned as right. Bergoglio would have seen something of his younger self in Prevost.

They tussled, as bishops often do with reli-

gious superiors, over the pastoral deployment of Prevost’s friars. Prevost jokes that when Bergoglio was elected Pope in 2013 he turned to his Augustinian brothers and said, “well thank God, that means I’ll never be made a bishop”. The reason, he told the Peruvian bishops in 2023, was, “let’s just say that not all of our meetings resulted in mutual agreement.” But of course Bergoglio admired plain-speaking, enjoyed healthy disagreement and would have respected Prevost all the more for defending Augustinian autonomy. Like Bergoglio, Prevost, a mathematician turned canon lawyer, was from the beginning concerned with a gospel way of exercising authority, a theme that runs through Bergoglio’s writings and retreats as Jesuit provincial.

After Francis was elected in March 2013, Prevost, then based at the Augustinianum by the colonnades of St Peter’s, invited him to preside at a Mass in the Basilica of St Augustine at the opening of the order’s chapter general. To his surprise, the Pope accepted. Their hug on the YouTube video of the event says it all. “You can relax

for now,” Prevost says Francis told him, ominously. In October, after Prevost’s second term came to an end, he returned to Chicago as director of formation and provincial vicar. Then Francis made his move. In November 2014 he named Prevost apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Chiclayo, on the north-west coast of Peru, and bishop a year later.

CHICLAYO IS A few hours south of Chulucanas and Trujillo where, after studying canon law in Rome, Prevost had missioned in the late 1980s and 1990s. That part of northern Peru, Piura, was under the Chicago province of the Augustinians. Over the course of 11 years, he was prior and instructor of the order, while also serving in the Archdiocese of Trujillo as judicial vicar and teaching at the Augustinian seminary. He also found time to be parish priest in a poor suburb of the city. But his great work, for which he is famous, was to create and run a joint formation programme for the three vicariates of Iquitos,

Apurimac and Chulucanas, training a whole generation of young friars who remember him with great fondness and admiration.

The Diocese of Chiclayo – in a city of around a million – had been created in the 1950s and had been headed for the previous 30 years by Spanish bishops belonging to Opus Dei. As Francis knew he would, Prevost took the diocese in a very different direction, marked by the preferential “option for the poor” of the Latin American Church, building up lay ministries and formation in Catholic Social Teaching. (One of his concerns was to enable poor people not to depend on handouts but to develop skills for work in training programmes across the diocese.) Yet, his successor, Bishop Edinson Farfán, also an Augustinian, told me he worked to build bridges wherever possible, bringing together Opus Dei priests in the diocese with religious priests, traditionalists with charismatics, and incorporating whatever was good from each of the groups. “He’s a bishop of communion,” Farfán said.

Farfán, whom I got to know at the Latin American Church’s ecclesial assembly in Mexico 2021, coordinated Peru’s synodal gatherings prior to that assembly. He says Prevost was among the bishops who most supported the process, inviting Farfán a number of times to give talks and organise the people. Synodality runs in Prevost’s veins, Farfán told me. From the start he brought people together in the diocese to agree a pastoral vision for the diocese, key to which was the training of lay leaders for both parishes and diocese. “After 10 years of work, laypeople are really well trained and are positioned,” he says, citing an institute created by Prevost which forms hundreds of laypeople on summer courses. And the content of the courses? “Essentially the Magisterium of Pope Francis,” says Farfán, who lists the key documents of the Francis era: “Basically, whatever Francis shed a light on, the diocese has sought to apply.”

Another legacy of Prevost’s time in Chiclayo are week-long diocesan assemblies involving around 1,000 representatives of the parishes (priests plus their parish councils), to dialogue on the needs of the diocese and to develop pastoral plans for the parishes. *Chiclayanos* recall Prevost speaking very positively of

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The former home of the Prevost family in Dolton, Illinois

Francis' synodality drive, saying he told them it was a way of the Church being closer to the people. In March 2018, his brother bishops elected him vice president of the Peruvian episcopal conference.

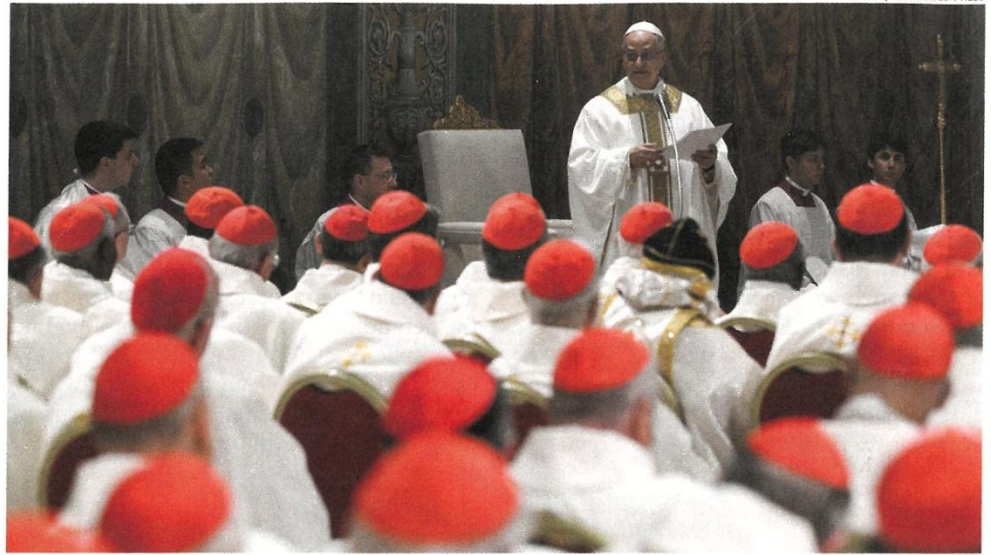
Since Leo's election, stories and photos have poured out of Chiclayo, many of them recalling Bishop Prevost's key role during Covid. Lambayeque, the region where Chiclayo is located, was heavily impacted. Prevost organised and coordinated a series of life-saving initiatives in collaboration with local authorities, coordinating relief and mobilising solidarity. But the people remember him above all for being there, for being unafraid to visit them and hear from them and show them his closeness at a time of fear and loss.

After Easter 2023, Francis brought his model bishop to Rome to oversee the appointment of bishops worldwide. It is never easy for dicastery prefects who are parachuted in; the Curia is quick to find fault. And the Dicastery for Bishops is a big beast in Rome. It essentially shapes the future of the Church, and involves regular close contact with the Pope. But Prevost – discreet, gentle, attentive – seems not to have put a foot wrong, keeping a low profile, earning admiration. The cardinals in conclave – among them, Cardinal Nichols, who served on the dicastery – were impressed by the way he convened and managed meetings, the way he included all voices, and by his work ethic.

In one of the few interviews Prevost gave, to Vatican News in 2023, he said he still considered himself a missionary, but had now a different mission: to help the Pope to find bishops who were pastors, close to their priests and to their people, who did not “hide behind an idea of authority that no longer makes sense today”, but exercised an authority of service and accompaniment. Prevost also defined evangelisation today. “We are often preoccupied with teaching doctrine,” he said, “but we risk forgetting that our first task is to teach what it means to know Jesus Christ and to bear witness to our closeness to the Lord. This comes first: to communicate the beauty of the faith, the beauty and joy of knowing Jesus. It means that we ourselves are living it and sharing this experience.”

HE SPOKE of improving the selection process of bishops, listening more to laypeople and Religious, and of the importance of Francis appointing three women to the dicastery. And he praised the Synod on Synodality, which he summed up as learning “to really listen to the Holy Spirit and the spirit of truth-seeking that lives in the Church”, and to “move from an experience where authority speaks and it's all over, to an experience that values the charisms, gifts and ministries that there are in the Church”.

Those at his tables in the Synod assemblies of October 2023 and 2024 say he spoke little, listened deeply and intervened incisively. At a Synod press conference, he spoke of wanting more synodal processes for selecting bishops and synodal structures that allowed bishops



to hear from their people; every diocese, he said, needed a pastoral council. He defended the African bishops' response to *Fiducia Supplicans*, the document on blessing of people in same-sex unions, as not a rejection of the teaching authority of the Pope but a reflection of cultural context, highlighting the importance of the teaching authority of the local bishops' conference.

Looking back, it is easy now to see the strategic wisdom of Francis bringing Prevost to Rome when he did – with enough time to see how the Curia works, and to be seen, but not so long for him to be dragged into its dysfunctions. In his role as prefect, he was at once brought into contact with the world's hierarchy, and at the two Synod assemblies took part in the Church's most universal and diverse gatherings in history.

On 6 February, battling bronchitis, and perhaps sensing his days were numbered, Francis bestowed a singular honour on Prevost, promoting him within the College of Cardinals from deacon to bishop. There were only six cardinal bishops at the conclave, including Cardinal Parolin and Filipino cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, who was made a cardinal deacon in 2012 and raised by Francis to bishop in 2020. Vatican observers said at the time that this was a sign Francis favoured Tagle as his successor. The *vaticanisti* paid no attention to the Prevost upgrade, despite it happening after less than two years of his being a cardinal. Like most of us, the *vaticanisti* did not see Prevost as *papabile* because he was from the United States. Francis knew better.

Since he first appeared on the balcony last week, we have been learning more and more about Leo XIV. The photos circulating – Prevost on horseback visiting remote communities, wading through floodwater, singing “*Feliz Navidad*” with the *pueblo* – confirm him as missionary, close to his people, a builder of communion. The pastor of the people has become Pope of the people, as the cardinals wanted, and he has slipped into this new incarnation with spectacular ease. When he addressed us from the loggia at the Sunday Angelus, we heard his youth, his many languages, his fine singing voice. He struck the same Francis notes, but now in English.

The Leonine era: captivating the world with a way that is missionary, pastoral and humble

It is still a shock to hear a native English-speaker Pope, the first since the twelfth-century Hertfordshire Pope, Adrian IV. But the genius of Leo is that he is more a product of Peru than of the US: the second Latin-American Pope is the first Pope of the Americas, as the Vatican refers to the whole continent, north and south, where half of the world's Catholics live.

IN HIS THREE-HOUR meeting with the cardinals last Saturday, Prevost said he would like Francis' passing to be thought of as a “paschal event”: a death and a rebirth, a stage in our continuing journey of redemption. He was clear: his own pontificate would be a continuation of the “precious legacy” of Francis. He asked the cardinals to commit themselves anew to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, which Francis had “masterfully and concretely set forth” in *Evangelii Gaudium*. He highlighted, in particular, the return to the primacy of Christ in proclamation, the missionary conversion of the entire Christian community, growth in collegiality and synodality, attention to the *sensus fidei*, and popular piety; loving care for the least and the rejected; and courageous and trusting dialogue with the contemporary world.

He then did what no Pope has done after addressing the cardinals. He asked them to take five minutes of silence, and afterwards to converse in small groups. He then opened the floor to anyone wanting to speak. Some cardinals leaked later that there was strong support for reforming the Vatican's communications, and that Leo XIV spoke of creating a body in the Curia that could bring together the prefects with the Pope in regular councils.

The Leonine era begins officially with the inauguration Mass tomorrow. But it already feels like the Franciscan era has been reborn and extended in new and exciting ways.

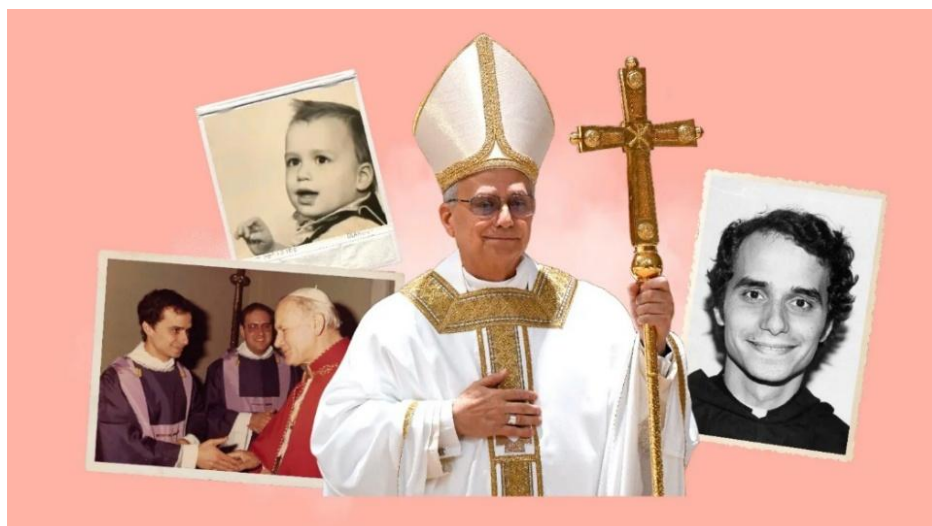
Austen Ivereigh's most recent book is *First Belong to God: On Retreat with Pope Francis*, with a foreword by Pope Francis (Messenger Publications).



John Prevost points to an old photo of his brothers, including the young Pope Leo, left



The room at the Augustine Convent Santo Tomas de Villanueva in Trujillo, northern Peru, where Pope Leo lived as Father Robert Prevost during his ministry there from 1988-99



Pope Leo XIV as a child, as a young seminarian and meeting Pope John-Paul II